

VZCZCXRO3908
PP RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHLB #0368/01 0891345
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 301345Z MAR 09
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4557
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 3617
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 3820
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000368

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
ALSO FOR IO ACTING A/S WARLICK
P FOR DRUSSELL, RRANGASWAMY
USUN FOR WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER
NSC FOR SHAPIRO, MCDERMOTT

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/29/2019
TAGS: [KPAI](#) [KPKO](#) [KWBG](#) [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [AL](#) [SU](#) [XF](#)
IR, SY, LE
SUBJECT: LEBANON: LOW EXPECTATIONS FOR DOHA SUMMIT

REF: A. STATE 28323
[1](#)B. BEIRUT 349

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Presidential advisor Naji Abi Assi did not expect major results from the March 30 Arab League Summit in Doha, except for a united position in favor of the Arab Peace Initiative. He predicted Arab relations with Iran would be a major, and potentially divisive, topic. He welcomed U.S. overtures to Syria and Iran, and said Lebanon does not fear it will be abandoned by the U.S. thanks to U.S. assurances. Regarding the June 7 parliamentary elections, Abi Assi made a strong case for a national unity government complete with a blocking third. He did not expect major violence in the run-up to the elections, barring a coordinated action among Lebanese leaders. Abi Assi also discussed Sleiman's other trips to France, Turkey, Great Britain, Spain and Moscow. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) DCM and Pol/Econ Chief met with Naji Abi Assi, advisor to President Michel Sleiman, at his office in Baabda Palace on March 28, on the eve of Sleiman's departure for the Arab League Summit in Doha (Ref A). The Lebanese delegation also included FM Fawzi Salloukh (Shia) and Minister of State Khaled Qabbani (Sunni), rounding out the delegation's confessional balance. Sleiman had scheduled bilateral meetings with UNSYG Ban ki Moon, Syrian President Bashar Asad, and Latin American leaders.

LOW EXPECTATIONS FOR
ARAB LEAGUE SUMMIT

[1](#)3. (C) According to Abi Assi, Sleiman will deliver two speeches, one at the Latin American - Arab summit and one at the Arab League Summit. Both will stress the need to avoid divisions between Christians and Muslims (at the November 2008 Interfaith Dialogue in New York, Sleiman offered Lebanon as host of the Dialogue) and to counter extremists. Abi Assi expected Hugo Chavez to try to take advantage of the Latin America - Arab summit to rouse anti-U.S. sentiment, but did not believe Chavez would be successful, noting that Saudi Arabia, Egypt and other U.S. allies would be there.

¶4. (C) Abi Assi believed the Arab League Summit would focus on three main issues, Arab reconciliation (including Palestinians), relations with Iran, and the Arab Peace Initiative. He was not optimistic about Arab reconciliation, which he dubbed a superficial effort rather than a serious strategy.

¶5. (C) On Iran, Abi Assi, citing Syria's offer to be the broker between Arab states and Iran, and Arab League SYG Amr Moussa, said some were trying to create an artificial link with Iran, which explained why Egypt was only sending a low profile envoy to the Summit. He said Lebanon shares the position of moderate Arabs who do not want confrontation with Iran but do want to limit its regional influence. He also commented that Iran was indirectly involved in both in Syrian-Saudi reconciliation (via Hizballah) and Palestinian reconciliation (via Hamas). He did not know if Iran would attend the Arab League Summit, noting that while there is a tradition to invite observers such as Iran, Turkey, and the UN Secretary General, Egypt and others did not want to set a precedent by inviting Iran.

¶6. (C) On the Arab Peace Initiative (API), Abi Assi said the trend among the Arab states, including Syria, which opposed it at the last meeting in Doha, now is to give it and the new Obama administration another chance and have the U.S. put more pressure on Israel. Lebanon remains a strong supporter of the API, he said.

U.S. OVERTURES TO IRAN,
SYRIA EXPECTED

BEIRUT 00000368 002 OF 003

¶7. (C) Asked about President Obama's Nowruz message to Iran, Abi Assi said Lebanon had anticipated such a U.S. overture, proudly proclaiming that he had written a report predicting this. However, it would take five or six months to see the results, he said, and much hinged on the nuclear question. The purpose of Sleiman's November 24-25, 2008 trip to Iran had been to emphasize the state to state relationship between the two countries. Asked about rumors that Iranian ministries had set up shop in Beirut, Abi Assi appeared unconcerned, surmising that Iran probably had some reconstruction offices in Lebanon to help with its many assistance projects.

¶8. (C) Abi Assi qualified the recent visit of NEA A A/S Feltman and Senior NSC Director Shapiro to Beirut and Damascus as "excellent," adding that Lebanon no longer fears it will be abandoned by the United States. The first signs of reaction in Lebanon were Druze leader Walid Jumblatt's overtures to opposition Amal leader Nabih Berri and recent softening on Syria, he noted. He also said that Lebanese voters were buying the arguments of both Christian opposition leader Michel Aoun and Hizballah that they were right in their approaches to Iran and Syria.

¶9. (C) As for the impact on Lebanon, Abi Assi said much also depended on Syria-Israel relations. Abi Assi was unconcerned about the formation of Netanyahu's government in Israel, noting that both right- and left-wing parties in Israel had been tough on Lebanon. He commented that Netanyahu historically had a tendency for "covert actions." If Syria pursued peace talks with Israel, he believed Hizballah would not follow and would instead turn more towards Iran, due to Hizballah's refusal to negotiate with Israel.

¶10. (C) Regarding the March 23 assassination of PLO aid Kamal Medhat, Abi Assi dismissed claims that Medhat was a militant PLO official, arguing that he was close to President Abbas, who was not aggressive. Abi Assi did not believe the GOL would ask the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) to take on the Medhat assassination. However, he surmised that the STL might ask to take the case if it believed there were links to

other assassinations.

ELECTIONS: COMPELLING
CASE FOR BLOCKING THIRD

¶11. (C) Asked about what appeared to be becoming a "red line" for Hizballah -- a blocking third for the losing side in the next cabinet -- Abi Assi said that as long as Hizballah and Amal are united, they can rightly claim to represent Lebanon's Shia community and therefore must be guaranteed a voice in the government. How can you rule excluding an entire community, he asked, noting that the Sunnis, united under Hariri, would be in the same predicament if they lost. He dismissed March 14-allied Shia as not being representative of their community. Unless independent Shia make a real showing in the next elections (which he deemed unlikely), Hizballah has a strong argument for maintaining the blocking third, he said.

¶12. (C) Although admitting the possibility of an "election Doha" whereby Lebanon's June 7 parliamentary elections would be predetermined outside of Lebanon, Abi Assi believed that Syria was content to let Lebanon play things out for itself. He agreed, however, that Syria was pushing strongly for a new national unity government following the elections. He cited two possible scenarios for such a government, either one (along the lines of the 2005 Mikati government) based on technocrats, or a 30-member cabinet divided equally between the majority, president, and opposition (the 10-10-10 formula Sleiman raised at the last National Dialogue meeting, and which had also been a proposal at the 2008 Doha conference). Abi Assi did not see a way out of the current impasse in the cabinet on the formation of the Constitutional Council (Ref B) before the June 7 elections.

BEIRUT 00000368 003 OF 003

¶13. (C) Abi Assi did not expect major violence in the run-up to the elections, although he noted that this was President Sleiman's biggest concern. What creates major violent acts is a coordinated decision by political leaders, he said, in a transparent reference to the previous government's May 5 decision to put an end to Hizballah's illegal telecommunications network. Pol/Econ Chief, noting the May 15 deadline -- a mere three weeks before elections -- for security forces to request information from the Telecommunications Ministry without going through normal chains of command (a policy the opposition objected to, accuse the March 14 majority of obtaining information illegally), asked whether this could be another potential flash point, to which Abi Assi immediately said yes.

¶14. (C) Abis Assi confirmed that Sleiman would not associate himself with independent candidates prior to the elections. However, he would welcome the support of such candidates, as well as the Armenian Tashnaq bloc, which traditionally sides with the President, following the elections.

UPCOMING PRESIDENTIAL TRIPS

¶15. (C) Abi Assi said Sleiman's next trip would be to Turkey (April 20), followed by a "working level" visit to Great Britain and state visit to Spain in May (his last trip before the June 7 parliamentary elections), and Moscow in July. Now that Lebanon has a president again, he said, Sleiman was receiving a lot of invitations. The DCM reiterated an invitation for Sleiman to visit the U.S.

¶16. (C) Regarding Sleiman's March 16-18 visit to France, Abi Assi said there were no in-depth discussions, although President Sarkozy clearly expressed France's support for his Lebanese counterpart. He noted that Sarkozy seemed uncertain on Israel, first offering to organize a bilateral dialogue between Lebanon and Israel, then talking about hosting a

multilateral peace conference.

COMMENT

¶17. (C) Hizballah is clearly preparing the stage for another national unity government, institutionalizing the concept of the blocking third (agreed as a one-time measure at the 2008 Doha conference). While opponents will argue that this goes against the Constitution and the majority's right to form a government of its choosing, Hizballah and its allies arguably have a compelling case for continuing the status quo, a case that Abi Assi expressed quite eloquently. If Hizballah succeeds, the post-election scenario would allow it to pursue its telecommunications, social, and other networks and providing Hizballah with a veto on any decisions relating to its arms, the Special Tribunal, or any other issue that would challenge its authority. End comment.
SISON